



Ensuring a Data-Driven Approach to Reopening Schools After COVID-19

Recommendations for Research and Assessment
June 2020



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Ensuring a Data-Driven Approach to Reopening Schools after COVID-19:

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Introduction

The pandemic brought on by COVID-19 has brought cities to a standstill and disrupted the functions and operations of school districts across the country. Urban districts with dense populations have been hit the hardest by the virus, and families in large urban cities have been significantly impacted. As school districts begin to plan for the reopening of schools in the summer and fall, research, assessment, and evaluation departments in the Council of the Great City Schools have an important role to play in school district decision making.

Research departments uniquely connect to many other divisions in the central office – curriculum, information technology, student support services, career and technical education, assessment, and facilities – and the data they collect often serve as the glue that holds district operations together. As each of these divisions develops plans for reopening or reengineering school, research departments should be involved at the beginning to inform decisions and assess the impact of changes on student and staff outcomes. Superintendents should also meet regularly with research directors to make sure that the research perspective is included in district plans, and representatives from research departments should participate in cross-functional teams to ensure data and research findings are incorporated into decision-making.

Specifically, research departments can contribute to the reopening of schools in 2020 by:

- Informing Decisions on Programming, Policy, and Budget
- Evaluating District Initiatives
- Identifying Student, Staff, and Community Needs
- Addressing Equity Disparities for Students and Families
- Assessing Impacts on Student Learning Outcomes
- Evaluating Strengths and Weaknesses of Distance Learning Implementation
- Rethinking Policies and Protocols for Calculating Student Enrollment
- Rethinking Transportation and GIS Algorithms
- Temporarily Suspending External Research in Schools

Below, we outline each of these critical areas of work. The organizational structure and capacity of your research department may influence the extent to which these recommendations can be implemented.

Informing Decisions on Programming, Policy, and Budget

Superintendents should include research departments in a wide array of policy and planning discussions to ensure that the decisions are driven by data and research. Specifically, research departments should:

- 1 Participate on committees and task forces to reopen schools. Research departments offer the unique ability to gather and provide data on the multiple needs of the school district as well as the broader community. These should include strategic collaboration with—
 - Offices, staff, and community leaders who represent English language learner communities and culture
 - Offices and staff who represent families of students with disabilities
 - Family engagement coordinators
- 2 Support the superintendent and district departments by researching various state, school board, and district policies to identify revisions needed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3 Provide literature briefs on best practices in areas requiring planning and decision making. Several research departments in member districts have developed research scans or briefs on key research questions identified by district administrators. Topics for these literature scans include blended learning, the impact of class size and student teacher ratios on student achievement, summer learning loss, and extended year programs, among others.
- 4 Participate in and inform discussions on human capital initiatives. District leadership should convene Human Resources Officers, Chief Financial Officers, Chief Academic Officers, and leaders of research to develop a short- and long-term strategy for human capital acquisition and deployment. Many districts are currently rethinking staff roles and deployment to align with state social distancing guidelines. For example, districts that are moving to blended learning will have to consider simultaneous staff requirements for in-person instruction and online support for students learning from home.

Moreover, due to a projected loss in state and local revenues in the coming months, many school districts will need to deploy school staff efficiently and, in some cases, adapt to potential hiring freezes or reductions in staff. Involving research departments in human capital initiatives is critical for effectively evaluating these initiatives in the coming months. For example, careful consideration should be given to the return on investment or student achievement outcomes for district initiatives such as instructional coaches, after-school or extended-day programs, and the like.

- 5 Collaborate with academic departments to develop and model multiple options for school schedules. When schools reopen, many will have to adhere to social distancing requirements to ensure the safety of students and staff. It may not be feasible to have all students in the building at once, if at all. Therefore, districts will need to model school schedules for multiple scenarios that account for different modes of instruction, varying costs, and staff requirements. Some considerations for modeling new school schedules might include:
 - Student-to-teacher ratios during in-person or distance learning instructional time. This might include the possibility that teachers will have separate A and B day class rosters even in elementary grades. Moreover, teachers may be permanently assigned to distance learning classrooms with higher per-pupil class sizes.
 - Staff assignments and requirements for:
 - online instruction
 - in-person instruction
 - blended learning

- Social and emotion supports for students
 - Costs related to:
 - Technology infrastructure for distance learning (e.g., adding data collection programs or algorithms for student enrollment and engagement)
 - Printing take-home paper packets with districtwide assessments
 - Including recess, the arts, and extracurricular activities into school schedules
- 6 Partner with community organizations that provide critical services to students and families. Research departments will need to develop data-sharing agreements to ensure community organizations and school district initiatives support one another. New school operations and norms will require updates to agreements with district partners.

Data Collection and Evaluation

Data collection and evaluation are critical considerations in the planning and implementation of district initiatives and programming during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Involving research departments as early as possible in the decision-making process is the key to ensuring that initiatives can be properly evaluated throughout the duration of COVID-19-related activities and beyond. Earlier inclusion gives research departments the time needed to produce more meaningful metrics for evaluating programs. The following sections outline strategic considerations for research departments and how they evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning.

Key Considerations for Research Departments

Research departments should consider:

- 1 Developing a measurement/research plan—including the articulation of logic modeling, necessary data collection, and intentional comparisons—for the evaluation of new initiatives related to the COVID-19 pandemic
- 2 Conducting needs assessments by interviewing or surveying staff, students, families, and other stakeholders. For example, the New York City Department of Education interviewed educators about their participation in a blended learning program. The interviews provided information to inform decision-makers about online and blended learning for summer and beyond.
- 3 Ensuring surveys and other data collection activities in the district are centralized to maintain alignment of efforts and avoid overwhelming parents, staff, and students with multiple survey administrations.
- 4 Developing dashboards to provide real-time disaggregated and actionable data in areas such as access to technology, student engagement, and COVID-19 infections. Dashboards make COVID-19 information easily digestible for district leaders who need to make evidence-based decisions on transportation routes and school reopening procedures.
- 5 Evaluating intersession programs (e.g., after school, summer, extended year) occurring in the district and examine programming, participant eligibility, participation rates, and program effectiveness.

Evaluating Strengths and Weaknesses of Distance Learning Implementation

The academic literature on distance learning and blended modes of instruction comes predominantly from higher education and adult education settings. Research departments will be tasked with evaluating the effectiveness and implementation of these instructional methods in a large-scale K-12 setting. The implementation of distance learning will likely vary in quality and fidelity for elementary, middle, and high school grades. As research teams begin to plan evaluation studies, they should take into consideration the following—

- 1 Obtaining data on students and households that were not able to access computers and internet at home. It is important to assess gaps in technology access to determine the reach of district initiatives during school closures and what their effects might be on student outcomes.
- 2 Assess the distance learning/blended learning professional development that teachers have received to measure its effectiveness. Determining the quality of professional development will help districts adjust their offerings to help teachers acclimate to a digital learning environment.
- 3 Evaluate the implementation of distance learning during school closures at each grade level. Assess the effects of variations in distance learning on student achievement gains or losses. Districts should use the findings to guide policy for the reopening of schools, implementing blended learning, or continuing distance learning in the fall and beyond. School districts should plan for the possibility of future closures. Evaluating distance learning implementation should include the following benchmarks:
 - Established distance learning procedures to ensure high engagement and strong participation rates were achieved
 - All students, particularly low income or historically marginalized students, can access district distance learning opportunities at the same rate as their peers
 - Efficient and effective teaching practices as teachers adapt to distance learning
 - Consistent grading procedures to ensure student assignment and workloads during distance learning are comparable across the district
 - Survey parents, students, teachers, principals, and central office staff on how supported they felt in their daily responsibility during the school closure and what the district can do to improve
 - Focus groups with principals and teachers to get feedback on all aspects of the district's response during the school closure
- 4 Evaluations should include comprehensive quantitative analysis of student outcomes including:
 - Benchmark assessments when reliability and validity have been established
 - Diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments for teachers to understand individual student instructional needs
 - Engagement/attendance data (logins, participation, assignment completion, etc.)
- 5 Qualitative analysis should inform how distance learning was implemented and what policies and decisions may have influenced student outcomes. Key considerations include:
 - Staff training for implementing distance learning and the effectiveness of professional development
 - Understanding the gaps in access to technology over time for students and staff
 - Staff practices for addressing social emotional needs of students during distance learning
 - Teachers' ability to adapt instructional delivery for distance learning

Identifying Student, Staff, and Community Needs

The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to take a significant toll on mental health and well-being. The lack of social interaction is difficult for all, and many students, staff, and families must also process the loss of friends and colleagues. Moreover, some students or staff may currently be living in abusive or traumatic environments (i.e., increases in domestic violence, cases of child abuse, LGBTQIA students living with families not supportive of their identities, etc.). Research departments can be instrumental in gauging the current and future needs of students, staff, and the community during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research departments should:

- 1 Survey students, staff, parents, and community members about their social, emotional, and mental health needs during the COVID-19 pandemic to better plan for the reopening of schools. Examples of district surveys are available in the COVID-19 Research Resources section of the Council's document sharing platform (www.edwires.org). Many districts have employed mail, phone, and web surveys to improve response rates from typically hard to reach community members. The surveys should focus on topics such as understanding—
 - Instructional Needs
 - The needs of English learners and students with disabilities during and after the pandemic
 - The needs of students with individualized education plans (IEPs) when schools reopen
 - Opportunities for integrating distance learning into normal school district operations (e.g., replacing out-of-school suspension with distance learning opportunities, employing distance learning opportunities after school or on evenings to mitigate learning loss)
 - Challenges students and parents face implementing home-based instruction
 - Obstacles teachers experienced when providing online-only instruction for students
 - Supports and professional development teachers need to provide high quality online instruction
 - Lessons that teachers have learned while providing online instruction that they wish to share with colleagues
 - Quality of online interactions (time interacting each day, opportunities for collaboration, student learning outcomes, etc.)
 - Quality of learning content (accessibility, rigor)
 - Cultural relevancy and responsiveness of academic instruction and content during distance learning
 - Social/Emotional Needs¹
 - Levels of stress for students and staff
 - Coping strategies for stress and creative outlets for students and staff
 - Social interaction with peers during distance learning for students and staff
 - Evaluation of district-provided social and emotional support to ensure it is culturally relevant and responsive

1 For more information on addressing the social-emotional and mental health needs of students, staff, and families, see the Council's report [Addressing Mental Health and Social-Emotional Wellness in the COVID-19 Crisis](#).

- Basic Needs and Accessibility
 - Food, housing, and health needs during school closures
 - Patterns and concentrations of resource scarcity (food, internet, and other deserts in the community), ideally using Geographic Information Systems (GIS)
 - The impact of job losses in the school community
 - Instructional needs of families (internet access, school supplies, access to a computer or tablet, etc.)
 - Characteristics of educational spaces at home during distance learning
 - Challenges and obstacles to connecting with instructors during distance learning
 - Guardian preferences concerning modes of instruction moving into the fall (distance learning, hybrid, AB schedule, etc.)
 - A household’s work arrangements and childcare needs in the fall for parents and staff
 - Members of a household (e.g., elderly parents, chronically ill family members) who may be at a greater risk from exposure to the coronavirus
- School Facilities/Safety Needs
 - Staff preferences for returning to work if there is not a vaccine for the coronavirus (returning to work full-time, telework, etc.)
 - Conditions that should be in place for parents and staff to feel safe returning to school and work
 - Tracking and addressing student behavioral issues on school-related digital platforms
 - Staff suggestions for managing visitors in schools, including tutors, outside program providers, contractors, parents, etc.

Addressing Equity Disparities for Students and Families

Council member districts have embraced efforts to ensure that schools provide an equitable education to all students and are working to address historic inequity, bias, and oppression existing in our schools. These inequities are often interrelated, including discrimination based on race, nationality, and cultural/language heritage; gender; sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression; religion; family structure; housing situation; interaction with the justice system; interaction with the healthcare system; physical, intellectual, or emotional disability; and learning differences. COVID-19 school closures have the potential to exacerbate inequities that already exist and contribute to greater learning loss for vulnerable populations.

To assist in these efforts to combat racism and oppression, research departments should:

- 1 Collect disaggregated demographic data in their evaluations, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, to identify how school closures are differentially impacting student groups (such as English language learners, students with disabilities, students of color, economically disadvantaged students, as well as differential effects according to characteristics such as age or gender). These data can inform the planning of resource allocations (i.e., distribution of technology, mental health support staff, student success teams, etc.).
- 2 Conduct an analysis of students and families the district was unable to reach during distance learning in the spring of SY 2019-20 to inform a more comprehensive approach for the reopening of schools for SY 2020-21. Students who were hard to reach or rarely engaged during school closures will need additional support in the fall to address learning loss and bridge technological gaps at home.

- 3 Conduct an analysis of who are the most vulnerable students, how they are performing, and to what extent the district has provided additional supports for their instruction.
- 4 Examine models of schooling that remove barriers and help create more educational opportunities for the most vulnerable students in the district.
- 5 Conduct a needs assessment of technology and internet access among the district's low income and vulnerable students to plan for the possibility of rolling school closures or providing distance learning or blended learning in the future.
- 6 Evaluate the distance learning professional development provided to teachers to assess how issues of equity have been included in the training. Reviews should include how culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, anti-oppression pedagogy, and asset-based approaches to education have been included in distance learning guidance.
- 7 Assess the impact of food and housing insecurity on schools and curriculum needs.
- 8 Determine whether fluctuations in family income or employment status owing to the COVID-19 pandemic are reflected in school lunch classifications for students.

Assessing Impacts on Student Learning Outcomes

The first instinct of many districts will be to immediately test students upon their return to school in order to gauge their academic level and needs. This would be a mistake for many reasons. To begin with, districts should focus on creating learning environments that feel both physically and psychologically safe for students (and adults). Educators need to work to reengage students in school, emphasizing the importance of the school community and the joy of learning. Administering tests too soon undermines both objectives.

Districts also need to ensure that assessment data are not misinterpreted or misused by teachers or administrators. Teachers far too often end up confusing scale scores with a student's capacity to learn. Based on standardized assessment data, teachers place kids into high or low ability groups or provide low levels of instructional rigor to lower performing students. This is not an effective strategy for addressing unfinished learning, and not an appropriate use of assessment data.

Another caution for districts will be the temptation to administer standardized assessments should online only instruction be extended. Administering computer adaptive or benchmark assessments while students are learning from home is very likely to result in data that are invalid and an inaccurate measure of student achievement. It is, however, entirely appropriate to employ computer adaptive or standardized assessments as a broad temperature check a few weeks into the school year—which is when they are typically administered—should districts return to face-to-face or blended learning. But it is more important than ever to ensure that students have had an initial period of a few weeks to reacclimate to the school setting, and that teachers are given careful guidance on what the data mean—and what it doesn't—and how the results should drive instruction.

Once standardized or benchmark data are collected, research and assessment departments will be instrumental in gauging and understanding the impact of the COVID-19 school closures on student learning outcomes. These activities should include:

- 1 Creating testing calendars that conform to district social distancing practices. Districts that plan on implementing block scheduling or blended learning models should consider extending the testing window, allowing schools the time to rotate students into school buildings and administer assessments.
- 2 Developing a student assessment plan for the possibility of continued distance learning into SY 2020-21. Research departments should begin discussions with assessment providers regarding the reliability and validity of online test administration for all district assessments, including benchmark assessments, assessments for students with disabilities and English learners, and state assessments.

- 3 Ensuring a real-time data system to monitor student progress and support educators. Research departments can create this system through comprehensive balanced assessments with the following objectives:
 - Gauging learning loss from extended COVID-19 school closures. Ideally, this assessment should happen in early fall of SY 2020-21
 - Monitoring progress during the school year toward learning goals to address:
 - Historical learning gaps between student groups, and
 - Learning gaps for all students because of COVID-19 school closures.
 - Evaluating learning progress at the conclusion of specific instructional periods
 - Providing professional development to leadership and instructional staff to increase the data literacy of school district employees
 - Reviewing what worked and did not work in providing instruction during the remote learning period
 - Using the Great City Schools on-line academic key performance indicators to monitor how your district compares to others
- 4 Collaborating with academic teams to review curriculum maps and curricular modifications to determine content not covered during school closures. Research departments can use this information to revise district benchmark assessments that schools will use to gauge student progress.²
- 5 Providing timing, space, material, and technology assessment accommodations for ELLs and students with disabilities for any assessments or benchmarks administered virtually. Particular attention should be placed on groups that would normally need extra supports (such as students with disabilities and ELLs).

Rethinking Policies and Protocols for Calculating Student Enrollment

Student enrollment is a basic metric for school districts that grounds every facet of district planning and operations. As school districts begin to plan for the reopening of schools in the summer and fall, consideration should be given to how student enrollment is measured, given the array of challenges presented by social distancing. To help address these challenges, research departments should:

- 1 Obtain an accurate count of enrolled students before, during, and after COVID-19 closures. Districts should work with their state to broaden the period for counting students and create reliable metrics for counting students engaged in distance or blended learning. Some current methods of collecting enrollment will not apply to the new circumstances. Districts will need to account for the various ways students can “attend” school (face-to-face, virtually, face-to-face for two days and virtually for three days, etc.). Attendance could feasibly be measured in unique ways, such as every day (face-to-face), once per week (virtually), and two to three days per week (blended learning). Other ways a student can demonstrate attendance may include:
 - Number of logins onto an online system
 - Completion of daily or weekly assignments
 - Daily or weekly phone calls or emails to students and families
 - Number of students picking up instructional take-home packets

² See forthcoming reports from the Council of the Great City Schools and Student Achievement Partners on addressing unfinished learning and priority instructional content.

- 2 Pay attention to getting an accurate count of students who have been hard to locate, such as students in low-income households, homeless students, students whose parents are essential workers, and English language learners. Should schools need to close again, explicit plans to engage and count these students must be developed.
- 3 Create a flexible attendance policy. Many families are undergoing substantial challenges that can affect a student's ability to regularly check into an online class or report to school buildings. Moreover, several districts have conducted parent surveys to gauge the percentage of students who may not return to school without a vaccine for the coronavirus. To account for these varying circumstances, districts should create attendance policies that allow students who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic to receive additional excused absences and make up classwork later.

Research and academic departments can take this opportunity to collaborate on aligning attendance and grading policies to ensure that students continue to be held to high expectations while being offered flexibility in meeting those expectations.

- 4 Account for student mobility. The economic impact of the pandemic can potentially lead to higher than usual movement within, into, and out of the school district. Research departments should therefore factor the possibility of higher than average student mobility into their enrollment projections, implementing robust systems for assessing student enrollment in each school prior to or immediately after school reopens to adjust teacher assignments as needed.
- 5 Ensure an accurate count of low-income students. The pandemic is causing massive economic strife that is affecting large numbers of families in urban areas. As a result, the number of low-income students is likely to rise. Getting an accurate count of these students will have major implications for school funding, evaluation of district initiatives, and analysis of student achievement during this time.

District leaders should work closely with research departments to broaden measures of poverty to ensure the district is able to account for all low-income students (since districts are providing meals to all students that need them). Possible approaches might include:

- Moving toward using direct certification if your district does not do so already
- Matching names of students with households that receive unemployment benefits
- Continuing or restarting household surveys for low-income families

Rethinking Transportation and GIS Algorithms

Given the economic impact of COVID-19, student mobility is likely to increase in response to changes in housing circumstances. Below are recommendations for research departments that manage Geographic Information Systems (GIS):

- 1 Ensuring the GIS system already includes a complete database of addresses with coordinates (latitude & longitude). This information will expedite locating students spatially as their home addresses change.
- 2 Many school systems are actively working to maintain contact with students through online learning activities that may extend through the summer. Consider updating address records and phone numbers as part of the ongoing connection with students.
- 3 Districts should consider developing new approaches to transportation that include social distancing for bus routes and considerations for siblings/students from the same address sharing seats. Consider utilizing bike lanes (if they exist) and encourage students to bike to school if it is safe to do so.
- 4 Districts should consider implementing applications or systems to support contact tracing and the identification of COVID-19 virus clusters based on geographic proximity.

Temporarily Suspending External Research in Schools

Due to the unpredictable impact of COVID-19 on the new structure and reopening of schools, districts need to create learning environments that feel physically and psychologically safe. To ease the transition back to school buildings, there should also be an emphasis placed on re-establishing everyday routines and providing students with a safe space to share and process their emotions and experiences. Having outside researchers in school buildings may undermine this sense of security and openness. To this end, we suggest suspending all external research in schools for the time being. We propose this language as an example for school district websites:

Due to the COVID-19 emergency, active data collection associated with external research is currently suspended as campuses are closed for an indefinite period. Capacity to participate in research activities will also be limited when students and staff return to campus locations at a future date. Concerns include safety as well as atypical contexts affecting data collection and research validity. This temporary suspension will allow schools to maintain a safe educational environment for students and time to return to normal working conditions.

Research departments should craft very detailed external research agendas that help address district priorities once restrictions for the COVID-19 emergency are relaxed.



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